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Fixing Canada's Unfixed Election Dates

**A Political Season
to Reduce the
Democratic Deficit**

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Summary

On May 17, 2005, for the first time in Canada, a provincial election took place on a date set by law, and not by the arbitrary choice of the current premier. British Columbia voters, election officials, potential candidates, party activists, journalists and civic education instructors were all able to plan for the election well in advance.

While this is a breakthrough in Canada, fixed election dates are quite common elsewhere in the world. In this study, Henry Milner assembles pertinent information on the rules regarding election dates in some 40 democracies worldwide: only a quarter has unfixed election dates.

He poses the question directly: Would Canadian democracy be better served if Parliament and the other provinces adopted fixed voting dates, following the lead of BC? After examining the standard arguments, Milner finds that on balance the fairness and administrative efficiency of fixed elections outweigh the added cost due to longer campaigns. More importantly, he argues, fixed election dates can be an important element in a comprehensive strategy to address the democratic deficit. They can help remove seasonal obstacles to voting, reduce voter cynicism at the manipulation of election dates for partisan ends, and attract more representative candidates — especially women — by allowing them to plan well in advance.

Beyond this, fixed election dates could enhance the effectiveness of a variety of measures designed to actively boost voter turnout. The planning and staging of public events, such as seminars, adult education activities, and public information campaigns, to raise interest and involvement in public affairs can only benefit from having the date of the next election in view.

With young people voting less, civics education is a key measure. With fixed voting days, Milner argues, teaching civics can be more effective. In planning the content of civics courses targeting the young people who are about to become citizens, educators would know the dates of the upcoming federal and provincial elections (and thus the deadlines related to nominating candidates, adopting campaign platforms, etc.), so they could better incorporate these elements and line up knowledgeable resource people for their classes.

The author makes a series of specific recommendations for changing to fixed election dates for the House of Commons and the provincial legislatures. First, he recommends that a precise election date be adopted (British Columbia adopted the third Monday in May). Second, he argues in favour of early fall for the date, explaining that formal campaigning would thus begin in mid-August, which marks the end of the vacation period and the beginning

of the "political season." Third, in case of a premature election, he recommends an arrangement like the one chosen by BC and Ontario, under which the calendar resumes with the next regular election, in the fourth calendar year following the unscheduled election.

What is the likelihood of fixed election dates becoming a reality in Canada? Henry Milner suggests that with some provinces adopting the practice on their own, and given the fact that the federal opposition is prepared to invest political capital in the issue, Canadians could join the citizens of most mature democracies and be voting under fixed election dates in the not-too-distant future.

Résumé

Une première canadienne a eu lieu le 17 mai 2005 en Colombie-Britannique : une élection provinciale y a été tenue à une date fixée par voie législative et non choisie arbitrairement par le premier ministre en exercice. Électeurs, personnel électoral, candidats éventuels, militants des partis, journalistes et éducateurs ont ainsi disposé de tout le temps nécessaire pour se préparer à l'élection.

Une première au Canada, donc, même si les élections à date fixe sont courantes partout ailleurs dans le monde. Cette étude de Henry Milner réunit des données pertinentes sur les règles en la matière dans une quarantaine de pays comparables au nôtre et révèle que le quart d'entre eux seulement tiennent leurs scrutins à des dates variables.

Aussi l'auteur pose-t-il directement cette question : la démocratie canadienne serait-elle mieux servie si le Parlement et les provinces suivaient l'exemple de la Colombie-Britannique ? À l'examen des arguments avancés de part et d'autre, il conclut que les élections à date fixe favoriseraient une équité et une efficacité administrative qui compenseraient les coûts supplémentaires liés à des campagnes plus longues. Surtout, elles pourraient s'inscrire dans une stratégie globale de réduction du déficit démocratique. En supprimant les obstacles saisonniers à l'exercice du droit de vote, les scrutins à date fixe amoindriraient en effet le cynisme des électeurs face aux manipulations partisans des dates d'élection et pourraient attirer des candidats plus représentatifs — notamment des femmes — en leur permettant de se préparer longtemps à l'avance.

Mieux encore, ils pourraient renforcer l'efficacité d'une variété de mesures visant à stimuler la participation électorale. La réussite d'événements destinés à sensibiliser les citoyens aux affaires publiques — séminaires, formation des adultes, campagnes d'information, etc. — ne pourrait que bénéficier de ces échéances préétablies.

Car à l'heure où la jeunesse vote de moins en moins, l'éducation civique s'impose comme une importante mesure incitative. En préparant le contenu de cours d'éducation civique à l'intention des jeunes en voie d'exercer leurs droits de citoyens, les éducateurs connaîtraient les dates des élections à venir (et des échéances touchant la nomination des candidats, l'adoption des programmes électoraux, etc.) et pourraient prévoir les éléments ou personnes-ressources susceptibles d'enrichir ce contenu.

L'auteur émet donc une série de recommandations en vue de faire adopter par la Chambre des communes et les assemblées législatives des provinces un système électoral à date fixe. Il propose tout d'abord de fixer une date précise (la Colombie-Britannique a opté pour le troisième lundi de mai). Il explique ensuite

qu'il privilégierait le début de l'automne, de manière à ce que les campagnes soient officiellement lancées à la mi-août, période marquant la fin des vacances estivales et la « rentrée politique ». En cas de scrutin prématuré, il suggère enfin d'établir une règle qui, à l'exemple de l'Ontario et de la Colombie-Britannique, prévoit la reprise du calendrier habituel dès la prochaine élection courante, tenue quatre ans après le scrutin prématuré.

Est-il vraisemblable d'envisager la généralisation au Canada des élections à date fixe ? Si d'autres provinces adoptent cette pratique de leur propre chef et si l'opposition fédérale y met tout son poids politique, comme elle semble prête à le faire, les Canadiens pourraient ainsi se joindre plus tôt qu'ils ne le croient aux citoyens de la plupart des démocraties avancées.

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Introduction

This is the third IRPP paper in which I address the democratic deficit in Canada. My primary objective here is to explore the relationship between the absence of fixed election dates and the democratic deficit. While the extent to which election dates are set by law as opposed to being open to the discretion of the government may seem a mere technical matter, I argue that it can be an important element in a comprehensive strategy to address the democratic deficit.

In a late-summer 2004 contribution to this series, I focused on electoral reform initiatives in Canada.¹ After that paper was published, on May 17, 2005, British Columbia voters were asked in a referendum to approve a new electoral system for their province. Although the 60 percent target was not reached (it was approved by 57.4 percent of the voters), the outcome signalled what the paper had described: electoral system reform had arrived on the public agenda. Canada would no longer be the exception. It would no longer retain the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system inherited from Britain for all its federal and provincial elections. This is a remarkable development: just six years earlier, in introducing a collection of essays on alternative electoral systems, I had written that while change had even come to Britain, "Only in Canada, universally [used] as a textbook case of the distortions that FPTP can bring, is there effectively no continuing discussion of the issue" (Milner 1999, 16).

Canadian exceptionalism also emerged in my 2005 paper, which looked specifically at the problem of youth nonvoting (see also Blais et al. 2002). The numbers in that context starkly set out the contours of the democratic deficit. In Canada, more than in most comparable countries, young people are dropping out of electoral participation. The result is that overall turnout has declined steadily and sharply, from 75 percent in 1988 to 61 percent in 2004 — the lowest figure ever, down from 64.1 percent in 2000. Canada has joined the traditionally low-turnout United States, Japan and Switzerland at the bottom of the list. Only the United Kingdom among comparable countries has experienced as precipitous a decline — from 78 percent in 1992 to 59 percent in 2001. Moreover, if the Canadian rate of 61 percent of registered voters were to be converted into the percentage of potential voters (the measure used in the US), it would be about 53 percent, which puts us well below the unusually high American 2004 turnout rate of roughly 60 percent (Milner 2005, 2).

While the 2005 paper focused on civic education, it also built on the findings of the first paper to consider the appropriate institutional framework in which such education could take place. Such a framework comprised an appropriate electoral system and complementary rules and regulations concerning

media access,² party financing, information dissemination and fixed election dates. This framework would ensure — and allow citizens and actors to expect — “that legitimate political positions are given expression and representation in the various democratic institutions, from the local to the national and beyond, at a level approximating their support in the population” (17). Fixed election dates, in particular, “would allow those initiating civics education courses, mock elections and other activities that encourage youth voting to plan their programs well in advance” (16).

In this paper I resume the argument. While Bill C-24, which took effect in 2004, has brought Canadian party financing regulations well into the progressive mainstream, there has until very recently been little discussion and no action on fixed election dates. The exception has been British Columbia, which again led the way. The date of the 2005 BC provincial election (which coincided with the referendum on electoral system reform) was not left to the arbitrary choice of the current premier. The date — May 17, 2005 — was set in law shortly after the previous election, in 2001. Thus voters, potential candidates, party activists, journalists, civics education instructors and everyone else concerned were able to plan well in advance.

While other provinces are considering such a move — at the time of writing, a similar law awaits third reading in the Ontario legislature — the issue has not attracted the kind of public interest that electoral system reform has. This is unfortunate, since fixed election dates, like electoral system reform, is an element in what could be a comprehensive approach to addressing the decline in electoral participation. Yet, compared to electoral system reform, fixed election dates is a relatively simple and straightforward proposition. It has not generated much discussion, perhaps because the standard argument for it is based on removing the advantage unfixed dates give the party in power. And fair treatment of political parties is not a rallying cry likely to mobilize public opinion. Judging by the experience of proponents of electoral system reform, focusing on enhanced popular participation — that is, reducing the democratic deficit — is a more effective means of garnering public interest and attention.

This, then, is the approach I take here to the question of fixed election dates. As I did in my discussion of electoral system reform, I stress the lessons learned from the experience of comparable democratic countries. And, as was the case in that earlier discussion — especially with regard to youth political participation — it turns out that the Canadian situation is distinctive, if not exceptional. Recognition of this fact has generated a willingness to question Canada's electoral institutions rather than treating them as something to be taken for granted.

Canada's distinctiveness with regard to setting election dates is unknown, even among those knowledgeable about such matters. We Canadians seldom think about the rules relating to the length of the electoral term, although we do sometimes — especially these days — complain about incumbent leaders flagrantly manipulating election dates for partisan reasons. But even so, we do not think about changing to a fixed date, assuming, most likely, that all parliamentary systems function as ours does, and that changing to a fixed date would entail adopting American-style presidential institutions, with all their drawbacks. This misconception is perfectly understandable, since there is a singular lack of solid comparative information on this matter. A recent groundbreaking work by leading Canadian political scientists André Blais and Louis Massicotte details every conceivable aspect of election law in more than 60 democracies but does not consider the date of the election (Massicotte, Blais and Yoshinaka 2003).

Hence, an important preliminary task here — within the limits of a relatively short paper focused on Canada — is to address this misconception. I have assembled the relevant information about the regulations and laws setting election dates in the 40 democracies most comparable to Canada (in Europe, among the major Westminster countries, and in important stable democracies elsewhere). I will show that though American-style rigidly fixed election dates are very rare in parliamentary and mixed systems, this does not make unfixed systems the rule. Quite the contrary: in only a minority of these does the head of government (such as the prime minister of Canada) effectively set the election date for the legislature.

Developments in the Westminster Countries

We consider first the Westminster countries — that is, those, like Canada, that inherited their political institutions from Great Britain. It is often assumed that these institutions come as a package deal, that you cannot change one without changing them all. Developments during the past 10 years in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales have undermined this assumption, awakening Canadian interest in the possibility of replacing our electoral system within the context of Westminster institutions. Once Scotland and Wales followed New Zealand in adopting a form of proportional representation election known as the mixed member proportional system, it became increasingly evident that, with regard to electoral systems, Canada was a backwater — more Westminster than Westminster itself.

A parallel situation applies with regard to election dates. When Britain created the new assemblies in Scotland and Wales in 1998, the acts proclaimed that

elections take place on the first Thursday in May every four years. In this they were following the lead from down under. While national elections for Australia's (lower) House of Representatives are unfixed, with a maximum term of three years, the National Capital Territory and three of the six states (South Australia and the two most populous states, New South Wales and Victoria) have fixed terms of four years. In addition, Australia's senators are elected for fixed terms.

Australia's senate, like other upper chambers — despite being among the few that are directly elected and exercise any real power — is normally not in a position to force the government to resign. Hence, we limit ourselves to the dates for electing lower chambers and do not look at upper chambers or the (typically fixed) terms of elected heads of state in mixed and presidential systems. We must note, however, that people in countries with such institutions are used to fixed-term elections. In contrast, with an appointed upper chamber and head of state, Canada (before May 17, 2005) was among the very few nations that had no experience of fixed-term elections above the municipal level.

Canada can thus be compared to New Zealand, which has traditionally been described as more British than Britain. But the New Zealand picture has been changing. New Zealand adopted the MMP system for its 1996 election, and it is currently discussing prolonging the parliamentary term, which has brought the question of fixed-term elections into focus. Prime Minister Helen Clark announced on June 14, 2005, that as part of an effort to move from a three-year to a four-year term, she would like to see New Zealand consider a fixed-election-date system like that used in Sweden ("PM Keen" 2005). Were this to happen, as we shall see, it would leave Canada among only 11 of 40 comparable democracies that still do not have laws setting out the dates for regular legislative elections. Of course, all these unfixed-election-date countries do provide for a maximum term length and, on occasion, Parliament continues until the date of its automatic dissolution. But this is rare and is in itself a choice made by the head of government.

Countries with only maximum terms of Parliament and no fixed election date set by law are classified as unfixed; but they are not identical, since the head of government's capacity to exercise discretion is not simply a matter of laws and regulations. Historical and institutional factors come into play. Choosing the date so as to optimize re-election prospects entails the risk of punishment at the hands of voters who view such an action as an abuse of power. The degree of such conventional or subjective constraint will differ among societies, even those with the same legal or regulatory environment. These subjective factors cannot be systematically incorporated into the kind of empirical comparative analysis here undertaken, but they should be kept in mind.

We might describe this subjective side as path dependency. If voters are used to elections every fourth spring, then expectations are high and costlier to defy.³ Related to this is an objective factor: the length of the maximum term. Canadian and British prime ministers operate with less constraint under five-year maximum terms than do their Aussie and Kiwi counterparts, with their three-year maximum terms; in Australia and New Zealand, the expectation and incentive to take a full term is quite strong. The exception proves the rule. The 2002 election in New Zealand was called a few months earlier than normal — in July rather than in the fall (spring, in New Zealand). The Clark government justified this decision by citing the untenable (and unusual) situation in which one of the parties, the (left-wing) Alliance, found itself. (Two factions of that party had become hopelessly estranged in late 2001. The *Electoral Integrity Act* compelled them to coexist within the shell of their former party, even though they intended to contest the next election as separate organizations.)⁴ The most recent New Zealand election reverted to tradition, having been called for September 17, 2005 — one week before the expiry of the term.

A simple indicator of the effects of these subjective constraints in countries with unfixed election dates can be found in the consistency of the interval between, and dates of, recent elections (though clearly other factors — specifically, whether the government is a majority one — will also be reflected). Table 1 sets out the dates of the most recent general elections in the 11 countries. As we can see, Canada, despite the fact that each of the five elections produced a majority government, is among the more inconsistent.

Classifying Arrangements Concerning Election Dates

A comparison of the regularity of election dates as set out in table 1 reveals that Canada is one of the most flexible, even among the minority of countries with traditional Westminster systems of unfixed elections. A contrast could be drawn, for example, with Iceland — also formally classified as having unfixed election dates — where elections have taken place every fourth April or May since the premature election of December 1979. As we shall see, if we place the countries on a continuum of fixed to unfixed, Canada would undoubtedly fall on the unfixed extreme.

One or Many Forms of Fixed Election Dates?

As noted, the commonly held assumption that fixed-date legislative elections are compatible only with presidential systems and thus incompatible with parliamentary systems such as ours is inaccurate. Yet this misconception is

Table 1
Dates of Recent Elections in Countries with No Fixed Voting Date

Australia	Japan
March 13, 1993	February 18, 1990
March 2, 1996	July 18, 1993
October 3, 1998	October 20, 1996
November 10, 2001	June 25, 2000
October 9, 2004	November 9, 2003
Canada	Malta
November 21, 1988	May 9, 1987
October 25, 1993	February 22, 1992
June 2, 1997	October 26, 1996
November 27, 2000	September 5, 1998
June 28, 2004	April 12, 2003
Denmark	New Zealand
December 12, 1990	October 27, 1990
September 21, 1994	November 6, 1993
March 11, 1998	October 12, 1996
November 20, 2001	November 27, 1999
February 8, 2005	July 27, 2002
Iceland	South Africa
April 25, 1987	April 27, 1994
April 20, 1991	June 2, 1999
April 8, 1995	April 14, 2004
May 8, 1999	
May 10, 2003	
India	Turkey
November 22-26, 1989	November 29, 1987
June 15, 1991	October 20, 1991
March 2-April 22, 1996	December 24, 1995
February 16-March 7, 1998	April 18, 1999
April 20-May 10, 2004	November 3, 2002
Ireland	United Kingdom
February 17, 1987	June 11, 1987
June 15, 1989	April 9, 1992
November 25, 1992	May 1, 1997
June 6, 1997	June 7, 2001
May 17, 2002	May 5, 2005

understandable, since any knowledge that Canadians possess of such matters is likely confined to Canada, the United States and, possibly, the United Kingdom, each being an example of either a "pure" fixed or unfixed system.

Leaving aside conventional constraints, unfixed systems are by their nature pure: that is, by definition they set no rules — beyond a maximum term —

limiting the power of the head of government to choose the election date. One cannot make a similar definitive statement with regard to fixed systems. The definition of a fixed system as one in which (as in the United States) nothing can be done to alter the date of the next legislative election is too narrow; it excludes any parliamentary system that allows for premature elections — as do almost all of them. It is unrealistic to expect every legislature to be always capable of replacing a government that has lost the support of its majority. To avoid a stalemate situation in which no government can be formed, parliamentary systems with fixed election dates, as a rule, make it possible, though seldom easy, to bring about early or premature elections. Typical rules allowing for premature elections impede the ability of opposition parties to force them by, for example, requiring a vote of nonconfidence to be supported by a majority of members, voting or not, or, as is the case in Sweden and Germany, that legislators make an extraordinary effort to vote confidence in an alternative government before any premature election can be called.

According to Desserud, this opens the door for governments themselves to prematurely force an election by resigning, in effect turning fixed into unfixed systems: "Fixing the election dates under our system won't work because there are no sanctions that can be imposed on a premier or prime minister who ignores the new rules and requests dissolution regardless...How do you prevent a prime minister from requesting an early dissolution? What recourse is there if the prime minister should do so, despite any imposed restrictions? How, in other words, do you force a government to stay in office?" (Desserud 2005, 52).

If this is the criterion, then beyond the United States and other countries with presidential systems, only Norway⁵ and Switzerland (though not a parliamentary regime) would qualify as fixed-date systems, since they do not provide for premature elections and the circumstance has not yet arisen in which the law has proven unworkable. But such a criterion is too narrow: even if they can theoretically force an early dissolution, governing parties under fixed-date systems very seldom do so. The German 2005 case, in which Chancellor Schroeder's extraordinary efforts to force a premature election could very well have been frustrated by the president or the constitutional court, is the exception that proves the rule.

In sum, even if they are not pure fixed-date in the American sense, these countries do not belong in the same (unfixed) category as Canada. The reality is that unlike Canada, the majority of countries with parliamentary or mixed regimes set a fixed date for their legislative elections, which is known and, as a rule, respected. In concrete terms, what distinguishes fixed-date countries is not whether they make premature elections possible, but whether they have a law

that sets out clear rules for the date on which (or the specific period within which) the subsequent regular election will take place after any such premature election, such that it is known to all. We now turn to these rules.

The dates of elections subsequent to premature elections

There are several variations in the way the date of the next regular election after a premature one is fixed. The simplest and most fixed variation is found in countries where this date is unchangeable — that is, unaffected by any premature election that may have preceded it. In such instances, limits are also typically set on how late in the regular term premature elections can take place. Finland is a good example: elections to the Eduskunta take place on the third Sunday in March every four years — even if during the previous four years a premature election has taken place. But, to avoid one election falling on the heels of another, no premature election can be held later than the first Sunday after the beginning of the 75-day period before Parliament must be dissolved for the next regular elections.

The second variation is found, for example, in the Netherlands and Hungary. Unlike Finns, who know that legislative elections will take place every four years in March, no matter what, Hungarians know that the next general election will be held in April or May of the fourth year following the election of the previous Parliament. In the former case, it is the actual date of the regular election that is fixed; in the latter, it is the time of year plus the interval since the previous election, whether regular or premature, that is fixed. (This is the variation chosen for British Columbia and Ontario.)

A greater element of flexibility is added under a third variation, used, for example, in Belgium. Here, when the Assembly is dissolved prematurely, the fixed term (of four years) begins when the new Parliament is installed. Thus, though known in advance, the date of fixed elections can be shifted from one time of year to another.

The degree of fixedness

Of the cases described earlier, some are examples of fixed election dates that specify the exact day, and some specify only the period. The extent of this period constitutes a second dimension affecting the level of fixedness. A fairly common practice is to designate a month and day of the week (as in Norway). We have noted that in Hungary elections take place within a two-month period. This seems to be the longest period permitted in fixed systems. Such systems usually specify the actual months and weeks concerned, as in the Hungarian case, but sometimes they do not: the German electoral act, for example, states

that the new election of the German *Bundestag* shall be held on a Sunday or a statutory public holiday 46 months (at the earliest) or 48 months (at the latest) after the beginning of the electoral period.⁶

One tendency demonstrated by the actual dates of elections is a different form of path dependency: fixed systems generate greater consistency than that required by law. The case of Germany is revealing in this regard. Not only have recent regular elections been held in the second half of September or the first half of October, but also the premature election provoked by Chancellor Schroeder in June 2005 — by the extraordinary measure of having members of his own Social Democratic Party caucus vote nonconfidence in his government — was timed so that an election would take place in the same period, on September 18, only one year early.

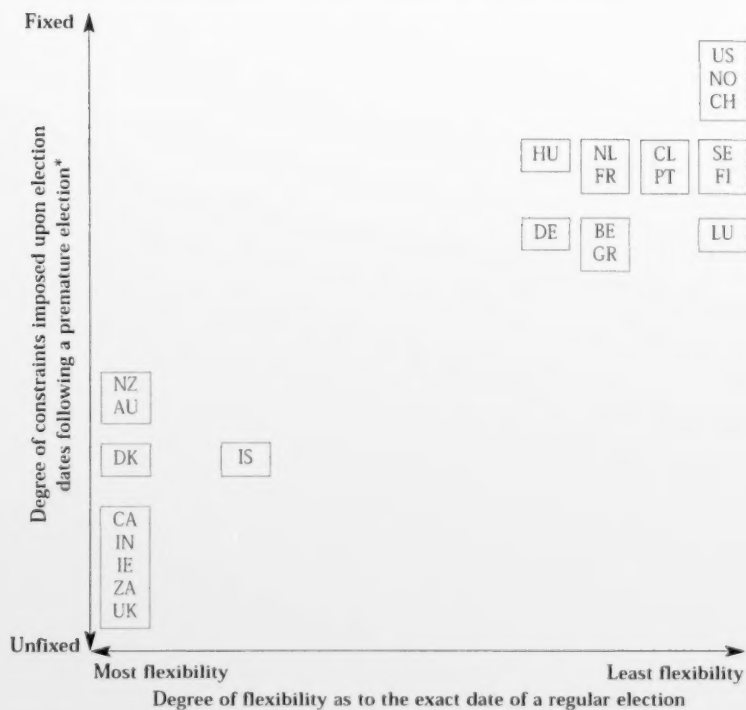
Given the variation in flexibility, it would be inappropriate to force all countries specifying a date or period for regular elections into the same "fixed" classification. To be safe, I place countries that allow greater flexibility as to the date and the rules regarding the dates of regular elections subsequent to premature ones in a third classification termed "flexible fixed." In borderline cases, where it is unclear whether to classify a given country as fixed or flexible fixed, I look at the consistency of actual election dates (see the appendix, column 3).

As a glance at these dates shows, elections are more often regular than premature in countries with rigid fixed terms and in those with flexible fixed-term election dates (most of them take place under proportional-representation electoral systems and thus very seldom produce majority governments). The exception is Israel, which is treated as flexible fixed, since that is the legal principle under which its legislature operates. The dates of its recent elections reflect the fact that the "exceptional circumstances" allowing for early elections have in fact proven not so exceptional. Another possible exception is France, where the powerful presidency appears to weaken the fixed nature of the legislative term. The relevant laws state that National Assembly members are elected for a term of five years, the election to take place in the 60 days leading up to the third Tuesday in June. However, the constitution gives the president of the republic the prerogative of calling an early election; and, in an effort to improve their political positions, this is just what François Mitterrand did in June 1988, and Jacques Chirac in May 1997.⁷

I have assembled pertinent information on the rules regarding election dates in some 40 countries that are comparable to Canada and for which data is available. This information, found in the appendix, serves as the basis for classifying regimes (in table 2) into three categories: unfixed, fixed and flexible fixed.

This threefold classification is used because we do not have enough information about the relative position of all 40 countries on the relevant scales to draw a continuum. However, to illustrate the key distinctions noted earlier, figure 1 sets out the positions of a number of representative countries relative to each other on two key indicators: one, on the horizontal axis, the degree to which there is flexibility as to the exact date of a regular election; and two, on the vertical axis, the constraints imposed upon elections following a premature election.

Figure 1
Fixed versus Unfixed Election Dates: An Illustrative Continuum



* Placing of countries with unfixed election dates reflects length of maximum term.

Note: AU-Australia, BE-Belgium, CA-Canada, CH-Switzerland, CL-Chile, DE-Germany, DK-Denmark, FI-Finland, FR-France, GR-Greece, HU-Hungary, IE-Ireland, IN-India, IS-Iceland, LU-Luxembourg, NL-Netherlands, NO-Norway, NZ-New Zealand, PT-Portugal, SE-Sweden, UK-United Kingdom, US-United States, ZA-South Africa.

Table 2
Countries by Type of Election Term

Unfixed term	Fixed term	Flexible fixed term
Australia	Chile	Austria
Canada	Costa Rica	Belgium
Denmark	Cyprus	Czech Republic
Iceland	Estonia	France
India	Finland	Germany
Ireland	Korea	Greece
Japan	Latvia	Hungary
Malta	Lithuania	Israel
New Zealand	Luxembourg	Italy
South Africa	Mexico	Spain
Turkey	Netherlands	
United Kingdom	Norway	
	Poland	
	Portugal	
	Slovakia	
	Slovenia	
	Sweden	
	Switzerland	
	United States	

What stands out in table 2 is that even after we have placed Israel, France and eight other countries into the flexible-fixed category (column 3), roughly half the 40 still fall into the fixed-election-date category (column 2) — almost twice as many as in the unfixed category (column 1), where Canada is situated.

Having established the context, we can now pose the question directly. Would Canadian democracy be better served if Canada moved from column 1 to column 2 in table 2 — from unfixed to fixed? In the context of Canada's parliamentary institutions, and compared to the situation elsewhere, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of such a change?

Why Fixed Election Dates?

Until recently, like most political scientists interested in political institutions, I gave little thought to the rules concerning election dates. If asked whether Canada's system of unfixed dates needed fixing, I would have responded that while that system gives a strategic advantage to parties in power, this was a small price to pay, given the cost of adopting an American-style presidential system.

with its fixed election dates. My work on Scandinavian welfare states in the 1980s and 1990s gave me an opportunity to observe Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish elections, and I came to realize that parliamentary regimes were in fact compatible with fixed election dates. But this knowledge did not alter my thinking substantially. I assumed, without bothering to check, that this was just another case of Scandinavian exceptionalism.

Developments in the later 1990s piqued my interest in the question. Invited to join a group of foreign observers of German federal elections, I realized that such invitations could be sent out well in advance only because the date of the next election was known.⁸ And Germany was a country respected for its innovative approaches to political institutions, especially those concerned with election campaigns, parties and voters. All of this coincided with my developing interest in the relationship between political institutions and electoral participation — or the lack of it, especially among young people. As noted in the introduction, it is the possible connection to such participation that sparked my interest in fixed voting dates. Before focusing on that specific relationship, however, we will consider those arguments relevant to Canada that have been advanced on both sides of the debate over fixed election dates.⁹ These are presented under 10 headings.

Responsible government

The standard argument for unfixed elections is that they are a necessary aspect of the parliamentary regime, that our institutions must provide for minority governments (such as the current one in Ottawa) when they lose their majority in the house and must go to the people. As we have seen, fixed-election-date systems can and do provide for such an eventuality. But minority governments are the exception. Our FPTP electoral system's singular virtue is that it produces majority governments most of the time. But, as we see in table 2, countries in northern Europe that exemplify effective proportional electoral systems use fixed-date elections, and (as we can see in the third column of the appendix) they have few premature elections. It is only under FPTP that (as in Canada) premature elections can be expected if no party has a majority of seats. Under proportional representation (PR), elections typically result in coalition governments that respect fixed election dates. Even when PR produces minority rather than coalition governments, they tend to act differently than minority governments under FPTP; in the latter case, parties know that the minority-government situation is likely to be short-lived. This is not the situation under PR: provoking an election does not bring majority government, so nothing is to be gained by acting irresponsibly. We can see this in the recent experience of continental European PR countries as well as New Zealand, Scotland and Wales, which recently adopted PR.

Cost of elections and effectiveness of election planning

The second main line of argument against fixed election dates concerns the cost of election campaigns. Critics contend that the adoption of fixed election dates would mean longer and more expensive campaigns, with parties vying with one another to get their messages out first. This is a legitimate concern, but such an eventuality can be averted by a combination of tight financial controls limiting the period of campaign spending and an appropriate choice of election date. Moreover, there is another potentially countervailing effect: the duration of the formal campaign can be shorter under the fixed-election-date system since the work of the electoral officers can begin before the election is called. This could save money and result in better planning, as was apparently the case in British Columbia.¹⁰ In addition, setting dates for by-elections is simplified and the overall cost of these elections is reduced, since calling them close to the date of an upcoming general election can be avoided when the date of the next general election is known.

Fairness

A number of arguments have been advanced in favour of change. The most common critique of unfixed voting dates has to do with fairness. Why should the party in power have a special advantage in planning electoral strategy due to its inside knowledge of when the next election will take place? Why should its leaders be permitted to time an election to exploit conditions favourable to their re-election?

Partisanship and government policy

Related to the issue of fairness is the fact that governing parties can to some extent also manipulate conditions, through fiscal and other economic policies, for partisan ends. Here the discussion of election dates raises a second traditional concern related to electoral institutions — namely, their relationship to the effectiveness of government. In countries with fixed-term elections, the United States in particular, some economists have drawn attention to the so-called political business cycle — that is, the phenomenon of incumbent governments manipulating economic policy instruments to aid their re-election efforts. Even though we tend to assume that governments spend more money before an election to generate employment and then make up for it after they come to power, the existing evidence that economies do better before elections, with fiscal pain to follow, is ambiguous (Nordhaus 1975; Golden and Poterba 1980).

If proving the existence of a political business cycle is difficult under fixed election dates, it is even more difficult when election dates are not

known in advance. Governments in such a system can manipulate economic policy and election dates so as to face voters at the time most conducive to attaining their electoral objectives. Japanese figures, according to Ito, show that Japan's unfixed election dates made it possible for the country's prime ministers to adjust the political cycle to the economic cycle in order to time elections to upturns in the economy (1989). We do not have the comprehensive data to test this assertion cross-nationally, but it is clear that parties in power, when given the opportunity, will try to use any system to further their chances of re-election. This window of opportunity is smaller under fixed systems due to their transparency — with election dates known in advance, efforts of governments to buy voters with their own tax money are more obvious. Under unfixed systems, it is only after the election is called that such efforts become apparent.

Administrative efficiency

Fixed elections should allow for better policy planning in the bureaucracy — more effective investigative commissions, and the like — simply because officials will be better able to plan into the future the use of limited resources, including the time of the participants. A fixed-election system would allow members of parliamentary committees to set out their agendas well in advance, which would make the work of the committees, and the House as a whole, more efficient, given the varying and at times conflicting calls on parliamentarians' time.

Political debate

The absence of media speculation over the date of the next election and the various strategic considerations going into it should leave more room for public discussion of the actual issues and priorities.

Reducing the power of the prime minister

Removing the prime minister's capacity to call an election at his or her discretion is especially pertinent in Canada, which is run, in the words of *The Globe and Mail's* Jeffrey Simpson, by a "friendly dictator" who, "when it comes to political power inherent in [the] office...now [has] no equals in the West" (Savoie 2000, 31). Unlike their counterparts anywhere else, Canadian prime ministers appoint the members of the upper chamber, the head of state and the members of the Supreme Court. Moreover, incumbent Canadian party leaders are invulnerable. It is inconceivable that what befell Britain's Margaret Thatcher, Australia's Bob Hawke and New Zealand's James Bolger — that is,

having the rug pulled out from under them by rivals in caucus — could happen to a Canadian prime minister. Moreover, the fragility of Canadian federalism actually strengthens the role of the prime minister, whose office takes control of any issue or policy domain even vaguely linked to national unity. Finally, Canadian prime ministers do not have to deal nearly as much as British prime ministers with powerful ministers who have deep roots in their party and well-established policies and positions on many issues.

Attracting greater representativeness of candidates — especially women — and increasing the quantity and quality of candidates and volunteers

By allowing for interested citizens to plan well in advance, fixed elections should make it easier to attract candidates with a greater need to reconcile possible political careers with other obligations. This applies especially to women and those employed in more traditional occupations. Similarly, a longer period of notice should attract more and better volunteers for campaign-related activities.

Bringing out more voters

Election dates known in advance and chosen to optimize participation should make it easier for certain classes of citizens to make themselves available to vote. This applies especially to potential voters with seasonal constraints, such as seniors and students. In the case of students, it would facilitate avoiding elections on a date when they are in transition between home and school — in early May or September, in particular.

Furthermore, selecting an appropriate fixed date would keep municipal or school-board elections from having to compete for attention with provincial or federal elections, which we know has a tendency to dampen turnout.

Reducing voter cynicism

In the long term, diminishing the ability of governing parties to manipulate the timing of elections for political or partisan purposes should strengthen public confidence in the political process. In the short term, implementing what will certainly be a popular measure should contribute to reducing the prevailing cynicism toward elections and election campaigns. The Environics Research Group found that "just a week before Prime Minister Paul Martin called the 2004 Canadian general election...81 percent of Canadians preferred that elections be held at specific and fixed times, instead of 'whenever the party in power wants to call [them]'" (Desserud 2005, 48).

Fixed Election Dates and Low Voter Turnout in Canada

The weight of the foregoing arguments at the very least places the burden of proof on those who would retain the system of unfixed election dates in those countries where it is still found. It may very well be that existing conditions or complementary institutional arrangements in another country retaining unfixed elections are such as to justify this system,¹¹ but the burden is too heavy as far as Canada and its provinces are concerned. This does not mean that moving toward fixed voting dates will in itself reverse Canada's low and declining voter turnout; but it is a necessary component of a systematic effort to address this pressing issue. First of all, several of the previously noted factors affecting the representativeness of candidates, the availability of volunteers and the reduction of cynicism toward politics can be expected to indirectly boost political participation, at least marginally.

Beyond this, fixed election dates are conducive to the effectiveness of a variety of measures designed to actively boost turnout. The planning and staging of public events, seminars, adult education activities and public information campaigns to raise awareness of, and interest and involvement in, public affairs can only benefit from having the date of the next election in view. This is especially the case with regard to youth participation.

Among the most important of these youth-participation-focused activities are mock elections. Canada's first large-scale undertaking of this kind this was conducted in 2003 in Ontario; students in 584 high schools cast ballots identical to those used in the October 2003 provincial election. The second such undertaking was Student Vote 2004, which, despite greater financial support and better organization saw far lower rates of participation. This was due to the fact that the June 28 federal election date was too late to allow for a simultaneous vote. Instead, each school selected an election day. Results were tabulated for 1,168 schools. Clearly, the number of schools was kept down by the lateness and uncertainty of the election date. In contrast, the fact that the voting date was fixed in advance clearly facilitated the latest of the mock elections — namely, Student Vote BC, which took place on May 16, 2005, in 350 schools.¹²

We do not yet have any direct evidence of the effect of these recent initiatives, but there is some reason to believe that they contributed to reversing the downward-turnout trend for first-time voters that seems to have prevailed in the 2004 election. A study carried out by Elections Canada

based on a sample of 95,000 voters drawn from electoral districts in every province and territory found that 38.7 percent of those identified as first-time electors turned out to vote (Kingsley 2005), as compared to the (probably low) estimate of 22.4 percent for the same group in 2000 based on a survey of voters and nonvoters by Pammett and LeDuc (2003, 20). The effects of the mock elections staged by Kids Voting USA, a nonprofit, non-partisan voter education program in 39 American states — which, researchers maintain, have been positive, especially on parents¹³ — are suggestive. Efforts like those of Student Vote 2004 to get young citizens to the ballot box¹¹ could also only be enhanced by their knowing, as do their American counterparts, the date of the next election (see Milner 2005).

Finally, and most important, fixed voting dates constitute a key measure — among those identified as required to set civics education in an appropriate institutional context — in a long-term strategy of addressing the phenomenon of youth political dropouts (Milner 2005). In looking at the experiences of countries that have been able to avoid Canadian political-dropout levels, I have stressed the designing of civics courses targeted at young people who are about to become eligible to vote, giving an important place to the positions taken by the different parties on relevant local, regional and national issues. One approach would be to issue regular invitations to party spokespersons to come to the classroom, both virtually (through Internet-based information provided by the parties) and physically; this way, young people can be exposed to another side of those seeking their votes, a side that is potentially more authentic than that provided by the media.

Approached in this way, teaching civics would certainly be more effective within the fixed-voting-date system, since civics educators would be better able to organize their programs well in advance. In planning the content of civics courses targeted at young people about to become citizens and voters, educators would know the exact date of the upcoming federal and provincial elections (and thus the deadlines related to nominating candidates, adopting campaign platforms and so on) and could therefore line up knowledgeable resource people for their classes. It is not inconceivable that such a course could be structured to focus in spring on elections to take place the coming fall (or winter/spring) — one year federal, one year provincial and one year municipal. (The fourth year could even concentrate on US elections — if the timing permitted — though this could be going a bit too far.) In such a situation, it should not be too difficult to schedule classroom visits by the appropriate players and to create appropriate pedagogical support material.

Specific Arrangements for Fixing Election Dates in Canada

A glance at table 2, which classifies the systems for calling elections for the lower houses of the legislatures in 40 countries, shows that Canada is in the minority in terms of unfixed election dates. British Columbia, with its new fixed-date system, is in fact in the mainstream and should serve as an example for other provinces and the federal Parliament. British Columbia's experience will add a Canadian case to those fixed-date systems surveyed here and help us to choose from among the specific measures used in the parliamentary regimes with fixed election dates those best suited to the Canadian context. This would allow us to test tentative guidelines emerging from experiences elsewhere.

Three such guidelines, which we will now look at, apply to modalities related to fixed-date elections: the degree of rigidity about the date; the season and length of term; and procedures with regard to premature elections.

Should the date be completely fixed — for example, the third Monday of every fourth September — or should it be more flexible — for example, during the months of September and October? On this question we can take as our starting point the rule adopted in laws already implemented in British Columbia, about to be adopted in Ontario, and proposed by the New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island electoral reform commissions. In each case, there is provision for precise fixed dates: in British Columbia, the third Monday in May; in Ontario, the first Thursday in October; and in New Brunswick, the third Monday in October. Experience in the coming years should demonstrate to us whether the planning advantages of knowing the exact date outweigh the loss of flexibility to deal with unforeseen circumstances provided by specifying a month or a two-month period.

What season is best? The report of the New Brunswick Electoral Commission noted that, spring or fall, the decision should take into account the dates of municipal elections, the school year, the budgetary process and the dates of any federal fixed-term elections (New Brunswick 2004). Moreover, given Canada's weather conditions, Canadians' vacation habits, and the seasonal requirements of seniors and students, there are a limited number of appropriate days in each season. As noted earlier, combined with strict regulations limiting campaign spending to the formal election campaign period, the date selected could reduce the likelihood of overly long and expensive campaigns. Sweden's choice of the third Sunday in September, for example, corresponds with and contributes to public expectations. Formal campaigning begins in mid-August, which marks the end of the vacation period and, every fourth year, the beginning of the political season.

We could expect an early-fall fixed date to have a similar effect in Canada. Moreover, if we are, as we should be, concerned about growing popular cynicism about politics, the fact that legislatures are not in session in the summer is an added reason to opt for such an election date. We would do well to avoid a parliamentary session in the weeks before an election campaign; in such sessions, strategies are transparently geared toward improving the parties' electoral prospects rather than the country's welfare. A late-February date would also work, except that Canada's climate, like that of Sweden, makes this a less attractive option.

What happens after a premature election with regard to the next regular election? British Columbia, Ontario and the New Brunswick Electoral Commission follow international practice in choosing a four-year fixed term. And they take a similar position with regard to the timing of the next regular election following a premature one. None choose the Norwegian system of eliminating premature elections. This is doubtless too rigid for Canada. As for the Finnish and Swedish system of disallowing changes to the dates of regular elections, it has the advantage of discouraging premature elections and enhancing advance planning (for example, in setting the curricula of civics education courses), but it could mean more frequent elections. Hence, the arrangement chosen by BC and Ontario — under which the calendar resumes with the next regular election, held on the first Thursday in October in Ontario and the third Monday in May in BC, in the fourth calendar year following the unscheduled election — should be given the benefit of the doubt. Its application would mean, for example, that if after the next regular election in Ontario, slated for October 4, 2007, the government were to fall, and a premature election were to be held, say, in May 2009, then the following regular election would take place on the first Thursday in October 2013 (rather than 2011). Given the advantages of developing a political season, this seems preferable to the provision — used in Belgium, for example — that would set that election four years after the premature election and thus conceivably move the date from fall to spring.

The upcoming years will serve as a laboratory for testing the effectiveness of these procedures in at least BC and Ontario. In the unlikely event that premature elections become the rule rather than the exception, changing to a more rigid, Finnish-style system under which premature elections cannot affect the date of the next regular election would be one alternative. Under this system, parties are less prone to precipitate premature elections since they cannot put off the date of the election in which they will have to pay the political price of imposing an extra election.

Prospects for the Future

At this point, First Ministers can set the dates of elections to the House of Commons and the provincial legislatures at will. This is a prerogative they are happy to exercise but poorly able to defend if challenged in the public arena. It would thus appear that inertia alone underpins the status quo. We can therefore anticipate greater and perhaps even accelerated progress toward a fixed system if, or rather when, the question is widely raised.

As they did in the case of electoral system reform, the provinces will lead the way to fixed-date elections. We have already noted the situations in British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island; in the latter province, the Electoral Reform Commission recommended in its 2003 report that the province provide "a fixed date for provincial elections or a very narrow window be selected during which an election may be called" (Carruthers 102). Several provincial opposition parties, including New Brunswick's Liberal Party, the Saskatchewan Party and the Alberta Liberal Party, have taken positions in favour of fixing election dates (Desserud 2005, 48-9). In Quebec, at the Estates General on democratic reform called by the Quebec government in February 2003, more than 1,000 delegates endorsed fixed-date elections.

Federally, the Conservative Party of Canada has clearly included fixed election dates among its commitments. Not only did its 2004 election platform, entitled "Demanding Better," promise to hold federal elections on a fixed date every four years, but also, prior to that election, party leader Stephen Harper tabled Bill C-512 in the House of Commons to this effect. After it died on the Order Paper, Conservative MP John Reynolds introduced a second motion on fixed election dates, which was defeated in the House of Commons on April 27, 2004.

With provinces moving forward on their own and the federal opposition prepared to invest political capital, it is possible that Canadians will join the citizens of most mature democracies and vote under fixed election dates in the not-too-distant future. It is a matter of building on the momentum in British Columbia and Ontario. While there are no guarantees, compared to electoral system reform and all the complexities it entails, adopting fixed election dates should be — forgive the expression — a slam dunk.

Summing Up: Fixed Election Dates and the Democratic Deficit

Let us imagine what would happen in Ontario if the federal government were to join the province in fixing fall election dates — the first being scheduled for the

fall of 2009. It would thus come roughly two years after the next election in Ontario, slated for October 4, 2007. That election, in turn, will take place about a year after Ontario's municipal and school-board elections of fall 2006.¹⁵ The overall effect would be to create a political season, a period in the year when paying special attention to public affairs and politics is the norm. This would make attentiveness to politics and voting more a matter of habit than it is now. And recent work has shown that voting is, to a not insignificant extent, a matter of forming the habit while still young (Franklin 2004; Plutzer 2002).

This new context, moreover, is conducive to specific activities designed to develop habits of voter participation. As mentioned earlier, a clear advantage of this would be that civics educators could plan their curricula more effectively, as could organizers of public events, seminars, public information campaigns and the like. Finally, the more traditional advantages of fixed elections — including more and better candidates, better volunteer availability and a reduction of the cynicism engendered by the manipulation of election dates for partisan ends — should improve the context in which such activities take place. In sum, it's a win-win proposition.

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Australia	Unfixed	March 13, 1993 March 2, 1996 October 3, 1998 November 10, 2001 October 9, 2004	The House of Representatives: maximum term 3 years, but can be dissolved by the governor general before the term expires, usually on the advice of the prime minister. Most parliaments have lasted more than 2½ years, before the prime minister has sought an election. Elections for the House of Representatives are usually timed to coincide with elections for the half the Senate, which must occur during every 3 rd year (Australian Electoral Commission, www.aec.gov.au).
Austria	Flexible Fixed	October 7, 1990 October 10, 1994 October 17, 1995 October 3, 1999 November 24, 2002	The lower house is the <i>Nationalrat</i> or National Council. Its members are elected by direct popular vote to serve 4-year fixed terms (Constitution, art. 26), starting from the date of its 1 st sitting. The National Council can, however, be dissolved before the end of 4 years, either by resolution of the National Council itself, or by the Federal President, or following a referendum in which voters do not approve the removal of the head of state. Next election to be held in fall 2006 (Austrian Ministry of the Interior, www.bmi.gv.at).
Belgium	Flexible fixed	November 24, 1991 May 21, 1995 January 13, 1999 May 18, 2003	<i>Chambre des Représentants</i> or Chamber of Representatives elections are held every 4 years. Elections can be called at any time by the King (i.e., the government), on request by the prime minister. Elections are held the 1 st Sunday after the expiration of the 4-year period of mandate. If this is on a holiday, the elections are postponed until the next Sunday. After an election when the assembly is dissolved prematurely the new Parliament is installed for a new period of 4 years after the validation of the election. This new Parliament stays for a full 4-year mandate, unless there is another premature dissolution. Next election to be held May 2007 (Service Public Fédéral Intérieur, www.ibz.fgov.be).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹ (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Chile	Fixed	December 11, 1993 December 11, 1997 December 16, 2001	The Chamber of Deputies is elected every 4 years. However, should the president make use of the authority conferred upon him or her by no. 5 of art. 32 of the Constitution, the newly elected Chamber operates only for the time remaining for the dissolved Chamber to complete its period. Next election to be held December 2005 (Servicio Electoral Dirección Nacional, www.servel.cl).
Costa Rica	Fixed	February 4, 1990 February 6, 1994 February 1, 1998 February 3, 2002	Unicameral: <i>Asamblea Legislativa</i> members are elected by direct, popular vote to serve 4-year terms, although an election can be called at any time. Elections take place on the 1 st Sunday of February. Next election to be held February 5, 2006 (Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, www.tse.go.cr).
Cyprus	Fixed	May 24, 1981 December 8, 1985 May 19, 1991 May 26, 1996 May 27, 2001	Unicameral Parliament <i>Vouli Antiprosopon</i> , or House of Representatives: term of office is 5 years. A general election must be held on the 2 nd Sunday of the month before the month in which the term of office of the outgoing House expires. The House may dissolve itself before its term of office expires. Next election to be held May 2006 (Cyprus House of Representatives, www.parliament.cy/parliamenteng/index.htm).
Czech Republic	Flexible fixed	June 8-9, 1990 June 5-6, 1992 May 31-June 1, 1996 June 19-20, 1998 June 14-15, 2002	Chamber 1 of the national legislature is called the <i>Poslanecka Snemovna</i> . Members are elected by popular vote to serve 4-year terms. Elections to the House of Deputies and Senate must be held within a term beginning on the 30 th day prior to the expiration of the electoral term and ending on the day of its expiration. Next election to be held by June 2006 (Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, State Electoral Commission, www.mvcr.cz/english.html).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹ (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Denmark	Unfixed	December 12, 1990 September 21, 1994 March 11, 1998 November 20, 2001 February 8, 2005	<i>Folketing</i> elections are held no later than every 4 years (Danish Parliament, www.folketinget.dk).
Estonia	Fixed	September 20, 1992 March 5, 1995 March 7, 1999	Unicameral Parliament <i>Riigikogu</i> elections are held every 4 th year, on the 1 st Sunday of March. Next election to be held March 4, 2007 (Parliament of Estonia, www.riigikogu.ee/?lang=en).
Finland	Fixed	March 7, 1991 March 19, 1995 March 21, 1999 March 16, 2003	Unicameral Parliament <i>Eduskunta</i> is elected for a term of 4 years on the 3 rd Sunday in March. If the president has ordered new parliamentary elections, the date of the new election is, following the orders of the president, not earlier than the 1 st Sunday after 50 days and not later than the 1 st Sunday after 75 days from the time when the order to hold new elections was made public. Next election to be held March 18, 2007 (Ministry of Justice, Election Unit, www.om.fi).
France	Flexible fixed	First round: March 16, 1986 June 5, 1988 March 21, 1993 May 25, 1997 June 9, 2002	<i>Assemblée nationale</i> elections can be called at any time by the president: maximum term is 5 years. The 3 rd Tuesday in June is the expiration date of the <i>Assemblée nationale</i> powers. Polling days for 1 st and 2 nd rounds are on the 2 Sundays preceding the expiration date. Next election to be held no later than June 2007 (France Ministry of Interior, www.interieur.gouv.fr/rubriques/b/b3_elections).
Germany	Flexible fixed	January 25, 1987 December 2, 1990 October 16, 1994 September 27, 1998 September 22, 2002	<i>Bundestag</i> members are elected every 4 years. According to art. 39 of the Basic Law, the new election of the <i>Bundestag</i> must be held 46 months at the earliest and 48 months at the latest after the beginning of the electoral period. The federal president determines the day of the general election, which must be a Sunday or statutory public holiday. Next election to be held fall 2006 (Federal Returning Officer, www.bundeswahlleiter.de/wahlen/e/index_e.htm).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹ (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Greece	Flexible fixed	May 4, 1990 September 22, 1996 April 10, 2000 March 7, 2004	Members of the Unicameral Parliament, <i>Vouli ton Ellinon</i> , are elected to serve 4-year terms. General elections are held within 30 days from the expiration of the 4-year parliamentary period or the dissolution of the Parliament as provided by the Constitution. Voting takes place on a Sunday. Next election to be held by March 2008 (Ministry of Interior, Public Administration and Decentralization, www.ypes.gr/ekloges/content/en/default.htm).
Hungary	Flexible fixed	First round: March 25, 1990 May 8, 1994 May 10, 1998 April 7, 2002	Unicameral Parliament <i>Országgyűlés</i> (National Assembly) members are elected to serve 4-year terms. The Constitution stipulates that the parliamentary election must be held in April or May of the 4 th year following the election of the previous Parliament. The president sets the actual date of the election. Next election to be held April/May 2006. In case of an early dissolution of the Parliament there are absolutely no additional or special rules on holding elections: they are organized the same way as normal parliamentary elections, i.e., in April or May of 4 th year following the previous election (National Election Office, www.election.hu/main_en.html).
Iceland	Unfixed	April 25, 1987 April 20, 1991 April 8, 1995 May 8, 1999 May 10, 2003	Unicameral Parliament of the national legislature is called the <i>Althingi</i> . Parliament is elected for a period of 4 years, but it can be dissolved earlier and new elections called (art. 45). Regular elections to the <i>Althingi</i> take place not later than at the end of the electoral term. The beginning and end of the electoral term are on the same day of the week in a month, counting from the beginning of the month. Next election to be held by May 2007 (Parliament, www.althingi.is).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹ (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
India	Unfixed	Nov. 22-26, 1989 June 15, 1991 Mar. 2-Apr. 22, 1996 Feb. 16-Mar. 7, 1998 Apr. 20-May 10, 2004	Chamber 1 of the national legislature is called the <i>Lok Sabha</i> , or House of the People. The life of an elected house is 5 years from the date of the 1 st meeting, unless dissolved sooner. There is no statutory provision for single-day or multiple-day polls. The Election Commission, which decides the schedule for elections, has to take account of the weather (during winter some constituencies may be snow-bound, and during the monsoon access to remote areas can be restricted), the agricultural cycle (so that the planting or harvesting of crops is not disrupted), exam schedules (schools are used as polling stations and teachers employed as election officials), religious festivals and public holidays. On top of this there are the logistical difficulties of holding an election — sending out ballot boxes, setting up polling booths, and recruiting officials to oversee the elections. Polling is normally held on a number of different days in different constituencies, to enable the security forces and those monitoring the election to keep law and order and ensure that voting is fair. Next election to be held 2009 (Election Commission of India, www.eci.gov.in).
Ireland	Unfixed	February 17, 1987 June 15, 1989 November 25, 1992 June 6, 1997 May 17, 2002	The maximum life of the <i>Dáil Éireann</i> , or House of Representatives, is limited by the Constitution to 7 years, but a limit of 5 years has been set by law (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, www.environ.ie).
Israel	Flexible fixed	May 29, 1996 May 17, 1999 February 6, 2001 January 28, 2003	Unicameral Parliament of the national legislature is called the <i>Knesset</i> . Members are elected by popular vote. Elections are supposed to take place every 4 years. The <i>Knesset</i> can decide, by an ordinary majority, to dissolve itself and call for early elections. Under the system of a direct vote for prime minister, the prime minister can notify the

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹ (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Israel (cont.)			<p>president of early elections. The elections to the 2nd (1951), 5th (1961), 10th (1981), 11th (1984), 13th (1992) and 14th (1996) <i>Knessets</i> were all held before the due date by the <i>Knesset's</i> initiative. The elections for the 16th <i>Knesset</i> were brought forward by the initiative of the prime minister. The <i>Knesset</i> can also decide, by a special majority, to prolong its term beyond 4 years. This happened in the cases of the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th <i>Knessets</i>, each of which served for more than 4 years. The elections to the 8th <i>Knesset</i> (1973) were delayed because of the Yom Kippur War. In the case of either delayed or early elections, the newly formed <i>Knesset</i> still serves a full 4-year term from the date of elections as determined by the law, regardless of the election date. The elections to the <i>Knesset</i> take place on the 3rd Tuesday of the lunar month of <i>Cheshvan</i> (the 8th month in the 12-month Jewish calendar) in the year in which the tenure of the outgoing <i>Knesset</i> ends (Israeli Parliament, www.knesset.gov.il).</p>
Italy	Flexible fixed	<p>April 5, 1992 March 27, 1994 April 22, 1996 May 13, 2001</p>	<p>Chamber of Deputies has 5-year terms. The president may dissolve 1 or both chambers after having consulted their speakers. S/he may not exercise this power during the last 6 months of his term, provided this period does not coincide partly or entirely with the last 6 months of the term of chambers. Next election to be held May 2006 (Ministero Interno, Direzione Centrale Servizi Elettorale, www.elezioni.interno.it/ind_consopo.htm).</p>
Japan	Unfixed	<p>February 18, 1990 July 18, 1993 October 20, 1996 June 25, 2000 November 9, 2003</p>	<p>Chamber 1, the <i>Shugiin</i>, is the House of Representatives and chamber 2 is the House of Councillors. Members of both houses are elected by universal adult suffrage. The House of Representatives can be dissolved, whereas the House of Councillors is not subject to dissolution. Next election to be held by November 2007 (House of Representatives, www.shugiin.go.jp/index.nsf/html/index_e.htm).</p>

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies' (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Korea, Republic of	Fixed	March 24, 1992 April 11, 1996 April 13, 2000 April 15, 2004	Unicameral legislature is called the <i>Kukhoe</i> or National Assembly. Members are elected for 4-year terms on the 1 st Wednesday from the 50 th day before the expiration of the term of office. A National Assembly election is held every 4 years, on Wednesday between April 9 and 15. Next election to be held April 9, 2008 (National Election Commission, www.nec.go.kr).
Latvia	Fixed	June 5-6, 1993 Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 1995 October 3, 1998 October 5, 2002	Unicameral legislature, or <i>Saeima</i> , members are elected for a term of 4 years on the 1 st Saturday and Sunday of October. The president can propose the dissolution of the <i>Saeima</i> . Following this proposal, a national referendum is held. If in the referendum more than half of the votes are cast in favour of dissolution, the <i>Saeima</i> is considered dissolved, new elections are called, and such elections are held no later than 2 months after the date of the dissolution of the <i>Saeima</i> . If the <i>Saeima</i> elections are to be held at some other time of the year in case of the dissolution of the <i>Saeima</i> , election day is determined by the Central Election Commission. Next election to be held October 2006 (Central Election Commission of Latvia, www.cvk.lv).
Lithuania	Fixed	First round: February 24, 1990 October 25, 1992 November 10, 1996 October 8, 2000 October 10, 2004	Unicameral legislature is the <i>Seimas</i> . Members are elected for a 4-year term. Regular elections to the <i>Seimas</i> are held on the year of the expiration of the powers of the <i>Seimas</i> members, on the 2 nd Sunday in October. Regular elections to the <i>Seimas</i> must be held not earlier than 2 months and no later than 1 month before the expiration of the powers of the <i>Seimas</i> members. Early elections to the <i>Seimas</i> may be held by the decision of the <i>Seimas</i> adopted by at least a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority vote of all the <i>Seimas</i> members, or announced by the president. Next election to be held October 2008 (Central Electoral Committee of the Republic of Lithuania, www.vrk.lt/index.eng.html).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies¹ (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Luxembourg	Fixed	June 18, 1989 June 12, 1994 June 13, 1999 June 13, 2004	Unicameral Parliament <i>Chambre des Députés</i> members are elected to serve 5-year terms on the 1 st Sunday of June. If, however, that day coincides with the Sunday of <i>Pentecôte</i> (a Christian holiday), elections to the <i>Chambre</i> are held on the last Sunday of May. Finally, if elections to the European Parliament are scheduled the same year in June, both elections are held the same day. In fact, elections to the <i>Chambre</i> and to the European Parliament coincide in Luxembourg and are organized simultaneously. If an election has to take place in advance, the following election will be held 5 years later, in accordance with the general rules (1 st Sunday of June, etc.); so the date for following elections always relates to the latest election. For example, the next elections to Parliament are scheduled for June 2009; if there have to be advance elections in February 2006, the following election will be held in June 2011 (<i>Chambre des Députés</i> , www.chd.lu/default.jsp).
Malta	Unfixed	May 9, 1987 February 22, 1992 October 26, 1996 September 5, 1998 April 12, 2003	Unicameral Parliament House of Representatives members are elected to serve 5-year terms. Voting must be held on a Saturday. Voting starts at 7.00 a.m. and closes at 10.00 p.m. (art. 64. (2) <i>General Elections Act</i>). Next election to be held by April 2008 (Electoral Commission of Malta, www.electoral.gov.mt).
Mexico	Fixed	August 21, 1994 July 6, 1997 July 2, 2000 July 6, 2003	Chamber 1 of the national legislature is called the <i>Cámara Federal de Diputados</i> . Elections are held every 3 years on the 1 st Sunday in July, which is a bank holiday (<i>Electoral Law</i> , art. 19). Next election to be held July 2, 2006 (Instituto Federal Electoral, www.ife.org.mx).
Netherlands	Fixed	May 3, 1994 May 6, 1998 May 15, 2002 January 22, 2003	Members of the lower chamber are directly elected by popular vote to serve 4-year terms. Elections take place every 4 years on a fixed day of the week, which is a

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies' (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Netherlands (cont.)			Wednesday. The Constitution provides for the dissolution of the Lower and Upper House before the end of its normal term. Next election to be held May 2007 (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, www.minbzk.nl/uk).
New Zealand	Unfixed	October 27, 1990 November 6, 1993 October 12, 1996 November 27, 1999 July 27, 2002	New Zealand has a single chamber of Parliament, the House of Representatives, which generally has 120 members. The House is elected for a maximum 3-year term. The governor-general plays an important constitutional role in the calling of elections, the life of Parliament, and the formation of a government. Next election is scheduled for September 17, 2005 (Elections New Zealand, www.elections.org.nz).
Norway	Fixed	Sept. 9, 1985 Sept. 11, 1989 Sept. 15, 1997 Sept. 10, 2001 Sept. 12, 2005	Unicameral Parliament is the <i>Storting</i> . Its members are elected by popular vote by proportional representation to serve 4-year terms. General elections are held on a fixed day of the week, a Monday, in September. A <i>Storting</i> may not be dissolved and new elections may not be called outside the normal general election years. Next election is scheduled for September 12, 2005 (Norwegian Parliament, www.stortinget.no/english/index.html).
Poland	Fixed	Sept. 19, 1993 Sept. 21, 1997 Sept. 23, 2001 Sept. 25, 2005	Chamber 1 of the national legislature is called the <i>Sejm</i> . Elections are held every 4 years, 30 days prior to the expiry of the mandate, on a nonworking day (National Electoral Commission, www.pkw.gov.pl).
Portugal	Fixed	October 6, 1991 October 1, 1995 October 10, 1999 March 17, 2002 February 20, 2005	Unicameral <i>Parliament Assembleia da República</i> members are elected by popular vote to serve 4-year terms. Elections are held on a fixed day of the week — a Sunday or a national holiday, or someday between September 14 and October 14. In case of dissolution, new elections must be held

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies' (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Portugal (cont.)			within the following 60 days. The legislative term lasts for 4 legislative sessions. In the case of a dissolution, the newly elected Assembly starts a new legislative term, the length of which is increased, at the beginning, by the time needed to complete the legislative session current at the date of the election (Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, article 171; Secretariado Técnico dos Assuntos para o Processo Eleitoral, www.stape.pt/uk/index_uk.htm).
Slovakia	Fixed	June 8-9, 1990 June 5-6, 1992 Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 1994 Sept. 25-6, 1998 Sept. 20-1, 2002	Unicameral Parliament is called the <i>Národná rada Slovenskej republiky</i> (National Council). Members are elected for a 4-year period. Elections can be earlier but not later. The president calls the election and the Parliament adopts the act by qualified majority (Constitution, art. 73). The president may dissolve the National Council if the policy statement of the government is not approved 3 times within 6 months after an election (Constitution of the Slovak Republic, art. 102). Next election to be held September 2006 (National Council of the Slovak Republic, www.nrsr.sk/default.aspx?lang=en).
Slovenia	Fixed	December 6, 1992 November 10, 1996 October 15, 2000 October 3, 2004	Elections to chamber 1, the National Assembly, are held every 4 years on a fixed day — a Sunday or any other holiday. Early elections are held in the event of the dissolution of the National Assembly before the end of its 4-year term. Elections are held not earlier than 2 months and not later than 15 days before 4 years have passed since the 1 st session of the outgoing National Assembly. In the event of a prolonged term, the term ends on the day the prolonged term expires. Early elections are held not later than 2 months after the dissolution of the National Assembly (Electoral Code, arts. 12-16). Next election to be held October 2008 (Republic Electoral Commission, www.gov.si/elections/rvk.html).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies' (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
South Africa	Unfixed	April 27, 1994 June 2, 1999 April 14, 2004	Chamber 1, National Assembly, members are elected to serve 5-year terms. If the National Assembly is dissolved (in terms of section 50), or when its term expires, the president must, by proclamation, call and set dates for an election, which must be held within 90 days of the date the Assembly was dissolved or its term expired. A proclamation calling and setting dates for an election may be issued before or after the expiry of the term of the National Assembly. Next election to be held 2009 (Independent Electoral Commission, www.elections.org.za).
Spain	Flexible fixed	October 29, 1989 June 6, 1993 March 3, 1996 March 12, 2000 March 14, 2004	Chamber 1, <i>Congreso de los Diputados</i> , elections are held every 4 years on a fixed day of the week. Both chambers can be dissolved by the head of government. The term of deputies ends 4 years after their election or on the day of the dissolution of the Chamber. Elections take place between 30 and 60 days after the termination of the mandate. Next election to be held March 2008 (Congreso de los diputados, www.congreso.es/ingles/index.html).
Sweden	Fixed	Sept. 15, 1991 Sept. 18, 1994 Sept. 20, 1998 Sept. 15, 2002	Unicameral Parliament of the national legislature is called the <i>Riksdag</i> . Members are elected by popular vote on a proportional-representation basis to serve 4-year terms. General elections to the <i>Riksdag</i> are held on a fixed day of the week — the 3 rd Sunday in September. Next election to be held September 2006 (Swedish Election Authority, www.val.se).
Switzerland	Fixed	October 20, 1991 October 20, 1995 October 24, 1999 October 19, 2003	Chamber 1, <i>Nationalrat, Conseil national, or Consiglio nazionale</i> elections are held every 4 years on a fixed day — the 3 rd Sunday in October. Next election to be held October 2007 (Swiss Federal Chancellery, www.admin.ch).

Appendix
Election Date Regulations in Selected Democracies' (cont.)

Country	Election term for lower chamber	Dates of recent elections (up to October 1, 2005)	Relevant laws and regulations
Turkey	Unfixed	November 29, 1987 October 20, 1991 December 24, 1995 April 18, 1999 November 3, 2002	Unicameral <i>Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi</i> (Turkish Grand National Assembly) members are elected by popular vote to serve 5-year terms. Elections are on a fixed day of the week, a Sunday. The assembly may decide to hold elections before the expiration of the election term. Similarly, elections may be held on the decision of the president under circumstances defined in the Constitution. Next election to be held 2007 (Turkish Grand National Assembly, www.tbmm.gov.tr/english/english.htm).
United Kingdom	Unfixed	June 11, 1987 April 9, 1992 May 1, 1997 June 7, 2001 May 5, 2005	Chamber 1 of the national legislature is called the House of Commons. Members are elected by popular vote to serve 5-year terms, unless the House is dissolved earlier, for elections can be called at any time by the monarch on the advice of the prime minister (Electoral Commission, www.electoralcommission.org.uk).
United States	Fixed	November 1992 November 1996 November 2000 November 2004	House of Representatives members are elected directly by popular vote to serve 2-year terms. Elections are held on a fixed day of the week. Next election to be held November 2006 (United States House of Representatives, www.house.gov).

Source: To supplement the information provided, when required, the main cross-national source of information used is the Electoral Process Information Collection database (EPIC, <http://www.epicproject.org>). The Project on Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe (<http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections/>) and the CIA World Factbook (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>) were also useful.

For each country, the Web sites of the agencies responsible for elections and the relevant legislative chambers were consulted (in parentheses). In cases of missing information, the people responsible at these agencies (names available from the author) were contacted by e-mail.

Notes

- 1 See Milner 2004. The article was based on information gathered in a book edited by the author (Milner, ed., 2004).
- 2 I wrote on the media access question in an earlier IRPP paper (Milner 2001).
- 3 I suspect, for example, based on simple observation, that the Canadian prime minister has greater flexibility than his or her British counterpart. While there are no legal constraints upon the British prime minister — as is the case with the Canadian prime minister — when it comes to election timing, a reading of the British press suggests that expectation is strong that the British prime minister will call an election roughly four years after the previous one. From what I observed of the 2005 British election, as early as the previous fall, the media and pundits were assuming that a spring election would be called, and Mr. Blair would have been hard-pressed to justify not going along.
- 4 "After the 1999 election, the new Labour-Alliance government...introduce[d] the *Electoral Integrity Act*, requiring any MP (whether from a list or electorate seat) who explicitly quits his or her party to also leave Parliament. When the minority coalition's support party, the Greens, refused to vote for the Act, the government turned to New Zealand First in search of a majority. Winston Peters, whose party had its own history of defections, insisted that the ban be extended to enable a party leader to oust an MP who has not explicitly quit if the leader issues a statement, agreed to by two-thirds of the party caucus, that the member "has acted in a way that has distorted, and is likely to continue to distort, the proportionality of political party representation in Parliament" (Nagel 2004, 137).
- 5 The law states that the Norwegian *Storting* (Parliament) may not be dissolved, and new elections may not be called outside the regular general election dates (on a Monday every fourth September), forcing parliamentarians themselves to replace governments that resign prematurely.
- 6 Even greater flexibility is introduced in the case of the Czech Republic by the wording of the Constitution (arts. 16-17), to the effect that members of the lower house are elected for a four-year term in an election held on a Friday or a Saturday, usually in May or June.
- 7 See <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/elections/historique.asp>
- 8 This was confirmed when I was told that there would be no such program for the (premature) 2005 election due to the fact that there was not enough time to organize it.
- 9 See Sawyer and Kelly (2005) for a useful summary of the main arguments, pro and con.
- 10 Elections BC information officer Jennifer Miller is quoted as saying that the fixed election date "enabled us to plan and administer the election much better. Electoral district officers had the time to find facilities and train staff so that the election was very successful" (cited in Gerry Bennett 2005, 4). Similarly, appearing on November 1, 2005 before a special commission of the Quebec National Assembly on electoral reform, director of elections Marcel Blanchet responded positively to the idea of fixed election dates, stating that it would make his job much easier.
- 11 For example, Denmark, which has the highest turnout rate among countries with unfixed elections and without compulsory voting, can afford to be complacent.
- 12 See <http://www.kidsvotingcanada.com/english.htm>, <http://www.studentvote2004.ca/>, and <http://www.studentvote.ca/bc/>.
- 13 Experience in the program appears to enhance the attentiveness of the students

to politics in the media and the home; it encourages parents to vote more often and become better informed about politics through interaction with their children (Golston 1997). Other research found that it sharpens students' critical thinking and narrows the gender and socio-economic gap in civic education (www.kidsvotingusa.org/shared/ResearchSummary6-04.pdf).

- 14 These include simple measures to inform young people, such as those reported by the chief electoral officer: "We also developed a series of outreach initiatives for young people...Community relations officers for youth identified neighbourhoods with high concentrations of students for special registration drives, assisted in locating polls in places easily accessible to youth, and informed the community and youth leaders about registration and voting. The redesigned 'Young Voters' section of the Elections Canada Web site...offered information on the electoral process" (Kingsley 2005).
- 15 Municipal elections are currently three years apart, but consideration is being given to the idea of shifting them to four-year intervals, like those provided for in the legislation concerning the provincial legislature in a report issued by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario in February 2005. See [http://www.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/region.nsf/0/B84FC40FE3CF2E2B85256FBA0058E4DF/\\$file/CA3050223.pdf?openelement](http://www.region.waterloo.on.ca/web/region.nsf/0/B84FC40FE3CF2E2B85256FBA0058E4DF/$file/CA3050223.pdf?openelement)

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